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Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism, by Rehana Ahmed, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015, 246pp., £65 (hardback), ISBN 9780719087400

Writing the City in British Asian Diasporas, edited by Seán McLoughlin, William Gould, Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Emma Tomalin, London, Routledge, 2014, 246pp., £90 (hardback), ISBN 9780415590242

The two books considered here both engage with South Asian Diasporas in Britain, focussing on 'writing' as a means of exploring the construction and representation of identities. The books share an understanding of Britain as a postcolonial country, shaped by its status as a former colonial power and by waves of migration from former colonies. However, the works diverge significantly in terms of subject matter and methodology. Ahmed's monograph is a work of literary criticism focused on a religiously-defined South Asian heritage group and driven by a cultural materialist approach that situates the novels considered in their contemporary political zeitgeist. The edited collection takes a more scattergun approach, ranging broadly across sources, disciplines and methodologies that reflect the different approaches of the contributors alongside a desire to create a new methodology for constructing deep histories of locales that intersects and unites diverse disciplinary practices. I turn first to Ahmed's monograph.

In the 15 years since 2001 – a year that saw 'race' riots in the north of England as well as the terrorist attacks of September 11 – there has been an increased media and academic interest in British Muslims and the discourse of multiculturalism. However, what has often been elided in both media and academic coverage is the factor of class, and its relationship to discussions and critiques of British multiculturalism. *Writing British Muslims* offers a timely intervention and questions some of the commonplaces and omissions of contemporary discourse surrounding British Muslims and multiculturalism. It does this by centralising the related but oft-neglected aspect of class and by challenging 'the liberal dichotomies that stand in for and obfuscate structures of power and stigmatise Muslims and multiculturalism' (11). The centralisation of class is effected through a focus on the South Asian diaspora, 'which has consistently occupied a position at or near the bottom of Britain's social scale' (18) and by clear contextualisation of the local spaces engaged in the narratives, as well as through Ahmed's theoretical approach that works to excavate and theorise the silences and omissions surrounding class in the literature engaged.

Adopting a cultural materialist approach, Ahmed expertly contextualises a series of literary texts by authors with a South Asian Muslim heritage by drawing on key public conversations and events that have shaped the discourse of British multiculturalism. In so doing, she is able to reveal and challenge pervasive ideologies that operate in the public sphere as well as demonstrate how these dominant beliefs are perpetuated or contested within literary texts. As such, the literary text is explored as a 'site of struggle between competing and unequal discourses, and as an object of struggle in disputes between the intelligentsia and some British Muslims' (16). A centralisation of literature means that Ahmed is able to extend the work done by critics such as Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin in their important critical text: *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11* (2011), which similarly focussed on the subject of representation, but in relation to non-literary sources (in the media, film and television).

Key to Ahmed's readings is the work of sociologist Tariq Modood, who does not join in the liberal left's critiques of multiculturalism, but advocates for its reimagination as a discourse that allows for collective identities and for a breaching of 'the public-private division that is essential to liberalism' (9). Modood's reconfiguration of multiculturalism through an 'elucidation of the limits of liberalism for an equal society' is central to the ways in which Ahmed undertakes her analysis of the literary texts, enabling her to challenge the secular liberalist parameters frequently engaged in the discussion of multicultural British literature (10). *Writing British Muslims* particularly draws attention to the exclusionary effect of a secular liberalist discourse when it comes to Muslims.

Alongside an exposure of ideologies and reframing of debates around multiculturalism and British Muslims, Ahmed's book breathes new life into much-critiqued texts through deconstruction of their premises. Despite the considerable volume of criticism already published on work by and controversies surrounding Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi and Monica Ali (for example), Ahmed manages to find a new angle through a centralisation of questions of class and collective identities that effectively serves to undermine reductive binaries between reason and religious belief, freedom and censorship, or individual reason versus cultural oppression. Furthermore, the book works to place the representation of British Muslims in a longer historical context, resisting historical frameworks that position relatively recent events (such as the 'Rushdie affair' or 9/11) as tipping points that have purportedly shifted both the self-identification and the representation of British Muslims radically.

Following an introduction in which Ahmed lays out the historical, political, and theoretical contexts in which her readings operate, the first chapter engages with 'Muslim culture, class and controversy in twentieth-century Britain', focusing in particular on British Muslim collectivities and mobilisations in the first half of the twentieth century. Through an exploration of the Muslim protest against H. G Wells' *A Short History of the World* (1922) in 1930s Britain, Ahmed is able to 'debunk' popular mythologies regarding the shift from (secular) British Asian to British Muslim identities in the wake of the 'Rushdie affair', demonstrate the recent 'hardening of a secular liberalist discourse' evident through comparison of the actions of British officials involved, and highlight the significance of intersections between minoritised class, race and religious positions that shaped the political mobilisation (40). This places readings of contemporary literature and events in a longer historical continuum that functions to link Britain's imperial history to present-day inequalities, representations, and discourses surrounding South Asian Muslims in Britain.

The next chapter moves on to trace connections between Salman Rushdie's essays, journalism, memoir and political commentary to his literary output in a manner that resists distinctions that have been drawn in some circles between the radicalism of his writing that seems at odds with the increasing conservatism of his politics. Ahmed reads 'class as a "structuring absence" or silence in *The Satanic Verses*, and the Rushdie affair as a means of "mak[ing] this silence speak"' (72). She interprets the awkward position that class plays in the novel, displayed through protagonist Saladin's distancing of himself from the popular protest organising in his name in the fictional 'Brickhall' location. Furthermore, by reading the novel's silences and omissions, Ahmed suggests that working class collective mobilisation around religious faith is identified largely with India, which effectively and conveniently displaces it from Britain and positions it at a geographical (and historical) remove. In this manner she exposes the liberal anti-racism that is uneasy with mobilisation around faith-based collective groupings and thereby the 'limits of this liberalism for an anti-racist politics' (72). Ahmed presents an

incredibly perceptive and original reading of the connections between Rushdie's fictional and non-fictional outputs.

Subsequent chapters pertain to 'The limits of liberalism in the work of Hanif Kureishi', 'Locating class in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and its reception', 'Creative freedom and community constraint in Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*' and 'Reason to believe? Five British Muslim memoirs'. As with the chapter on Rushdie, Ahmed is incisive and convincing in her against-the-grain readings of the novels that seek to recover what is silenced or excluded so as to show what can and what cannot be said. Connections that are drawn throughout between representations found in the literature and the lived realities and media representations of British Muslims also indicate the limitations of a secular anti-racist stance that fails to take into account minoritised religious groups.

Of the three categories flagged up in the book's subheading (religion, class, and multiculturalism), the latter two are explored in great detail. What is less convincing at points is the discussion of religion, which functions in this critical work largely as an identity category without engagement with scriptural Islam. Nevertheless, this is perhaps to accuse the work of failing to be something that it never sets out to be: it is concerned primarily with bridging the gap between 'good' private and 'bad' public or political expressions of faith, and with the relationship between religious identity groups and discourses surrounding multiculturalism that work to exclude religious (particularly Muslim) collectivities. The work is also necessarily limited (and Ahmed acknowledges this) through its focus on authors with a South Asian Muslim cultural heritage, which excludes the works of authors such as Leila Aboulela, Sunjeev Sahota and Robin Yassin-Kassab, who are either not of South Asian or not of Muslim heritage, yet write interestingly about British Muslims and intersections with classed and raced identifications.

What is perhaps more problematic is the selection of authors in relation to a focus on class. Though prioritising the representation of class politics in the literature, Ahmed engages predominantly with cosmopolitan and Oxbridge-educated authors in whose work class frequently functions as an absent presence that requires recovery. Consistent with the cultural materialist approach adopted, Ahmed occupies herself with evoking and critiquing a dominant zeitgeist. Informed by the work of post-structuralist Pierre Macherey, the book is driven by reading the silences and omissions of these widely-consumed literary works that in showing what cannot be said effectively reveal 'what they *can* say about Muslims and multiculturalism in Britain, and the limits of this speech, thus shedding light on the ideological pressures operating in the social context' (17). Yet this reading practice has the paradoxical effect of silencing the voices of authors who engage more explicitly with working-class mobilisations around religious identifications. The work of Tariq Mehmood – who was arrested in the early 1980s as one of the 'Bradford 12' for making explosives, then released following a successful self-defence plea in the context of racist attacks, and who is himself a working-class author from a family of textile mill workers – is much more explicitly engaged with political discontent and mobilisation informed by a context of high unemployment and xenophobic nationalism, yet voices such as his are left out of the discussion.

Nevertheless, this is an excellent theoretical volume, and one that I will have no hesitation in recommending to colleagues and students alike. It bears the hallmark of exceptional scholarship, comprising thorough research, clarity of writing, and wonderfully executed arguments whilst offering genuinely new insights into literary texts and 'affairs' that already have a great body of criticism devoted to them. *Writing British Muslims* will undoubtedly

become a key theoretical touchstone, both for those considering the representations of British Muslims, and for those exploring the discourse of British multiculturalism (and its limits) more broadly.

Though bearing a significant titular resemblance to Ahmed's monograph, there is in fact little overlap between this and Seán McLoughlin, William Gould, Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Emma Tomalin's edited collection *Writing the City in British Asian Diasporas*, which is the subject of the remainder of this review. This edited collection surveys the considerable body of writing that has evolved around British Asian diasporas, through a devolved approach that focuses on five specific cities with large South Asian communities: Bradford, the East End of London, Manchester, Leicester and Birmingham. These cities are explored as key sites for the negotiation of power, the emergence of conflicting narratives and discourses, and localities of cultural and material production and consumption. As a whole, the collection offers a new approach to diaspora studies by foregrounding 'multi-local' identities that prioritise activities within and relationships between those situated in specific regions over transnational approaches or those that reintroduce the importance of spatial constructs through recuperating the nation state. This shares with the concept of the transnational the notion that the local and global are mutually constituted, whilst ensuring that the particularities of specific sites are acknowledged without reifying the national.

Existing studies of the cities under consideration have often been rooted in the Chicago school of urban sociology or the Manchester school of urban anthropology, but as McLoughlin identifies, these studies were limited as 'attention to the dynamics of place and space were often subordinate to competing, though actually complementary, analytical paradigms driven by the objective realities of race and class on the one hand, and the subjective realities of ethnicity on the other' (6). This collection works as a corrective to the gap in extant criticism by recentralising the local, following in the footsteps of Ali, Kalra and Sayyid's edited collection *A Postcolonial People: South Asians in Britain* (2006), which focussed on specific locales through the various frameworks of 'history and demography, reflexive autobiography and vignettes of streetscapes' (7). As such, the chapters collected here adopt Avtar Brah's influential construction of 'diaspora space' put forward in *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996) and similarly engage with the 'lived experience of a locality' (Brah in McLoughlin *et al.*, 8)

The work conducted in advance of the realisation of this publication involved a sustained engagement with non-academics through a series of networking events funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and hosted in each of the cities covered. These events welcomed input from representatives ranging from religious and minority ethnic groups, to those involved in local government and policy-making, to cultural producers, historians, archivists and publishers. In the introduction, McLoughlin acknowledges that there were some 'conflicting agendas', and that the events could not hope to 'undo the unequal relations between academics and non-academics' but it did 'produce important interventions' such as problematising the methodologies at work (including the focus on writing published in English) (9). As such, the academics who contribute to this collection maintain an awareness of their own positionality and the dynamic of community insiders and outsiders, though this does become a little essentialising at points. Indeed, Kalra's suggestion that 'Perhaps only genres involving self-representation through cultural production can avoid the accusation of "writing for the Other"' seems to retrench binaries that are productively undermined elsewhere in the collection (82).

Each of the chapters collected here integrates the disciplines of history, religion, literary studies and sociology, with contributors drawn from a network of academics employed in Arts faculties across Britain. They draw on multiple narratives and sources in order to create a thick history and develop a 'new approach to writing the city' (16). By juxtaposing discordant sources, gaps and silences in scholarly or official accounts are highlighted, and micronarratives (in the form of oral histories or situated activities) question the normativities constructed through institutional discourses. Though this new approach is laudable, contributors recognise that such a "pieced-together archive [...] is inevitably "full of holes" as it is necessarily selective (2). More problematic, is the way that certain archives are described with frustratingly little analysis of what is contained therein. This is also reflected in the conclusions drawn, which are often tentative and heavily dependent on citations from existing sources, perhaps indicative of a fear of closing down discourses that contributors have worked to challenge and open up.

Throughout the collection there is a focus on historiography as much as history, as contributors interrogate the institutions, discourses and power relations that shape particular narratives. This involves the inclusion of sources often overlooked by academic and professional historians, such as local oral histories. The ethos of selection involves pitting individual life stories against official discourse and statistics. There is, nevertheless, the acknowledgement that while oral histories can be instrumental in illuminating omissions in academic or official accounts, they must be taken in the context of funding mechanisms that often tie in with state-driven agendas alongside a sense of responsibility to one's community, factors which combine to ensure that celebratory accounts are the ones more likely to be recorded. The collection must be commended for rejecting a 'great men' approach to the history of the cities involved, through a far more democratic selection of sources and voices.

The collection is divided into two sections. The first section contains chapters devoted to each of the five cities involved in the study. Drawing on journalistic sources, ethnographic texts, oral history and literary fiction, 'Writing "Bradistan" across the domains of social reality' is organised chronologically around three key periods in the history of the city, from migration and initial settlement in the 1970s, to the public recognition of minority identities in the 1980s, to the contemporary period (since the 1990s) that has frequently seen Pakistani Muslims as "problem" or "suspect" British citizens' (21). McLoughlin curiously opts to deploy the journalistic term 'Bradistan' throughout to refer to an area of Bradford densely populated by those of Pakistani heritage, without acknowledgement of the term's negative connotations or an interrogation of its politics. John Eade's subsequent chapter on 'Representing British Bangladeshis in London's East End' focuses on conflicting representations of the lives of Bangladeshis in the area, which are bound up in questions of authenticity regarding insider status and ideological differences shaped by intersecting aspects of identity politics. A chapter on 'Writing British Asian Manchester' by Virinder S. Kalra focuses on the 'transnational flows of culture, mores, people and memories', demonstrating how these are represented in many different genres that write the city (71). Kalra centres on Manchester's 'Curry Mile' as a 'narrative harmony' – or recurrent trope – that crops up repeatedly to index the city's British Asian presence (72). McLoughlin's chapter on 'Representations of multi-Asian Leicester' compellingly argues that the dominant narrative depicting Leicester 'as a model of "community cohesion"' following the absence of riots in 2001 requires 'radical reassessment' that involves the contextualisation, complication and critique of institutional rhetoric (89, 109). The final chapter in the first section – focussed on Birmingham – sees Richard Gale demonstrate the paradoxes characterising the city (as a place of both entrepreneurial success and structural exclusion of British Asians from the labour market) as following from differences in narrative

perspective and narrative traditions. Chapters in the first section sometimes suffer from their resemblance to literature reviews, with laborious studies of relevant work in the field and conclusions constructed as a tissue of quotations from extant studies.

The second section is more compelling in its structure, due to a thematic organisation that allows a tighter focus on particular areas: history, religion, women, and writing. The final chapter, by Ananya Jahanara Kabir, is for me the pinnacle of the collection, adopting an argumentative structure and analytical tone that is missing from some of the earlier chapters. In it, she examines a range of cultural productions and interrogates a literary critical methodology that frequently (and problematically) tends to replicate 'mainstream homogenizing tendencies' (such as the privileging of London, or of the novel form) and 'patterns of exclusion' observable in the publishing industry around books that reveal the less savoury realities of British Asian lives (204-5). Kabir convincingly advocates for the inclusion of approaches and sources drawn from sociology, anthropology and social studies in literary scholarship, arguing that identity is produced, negotiated and refashioned at the intersection of many 'positions of *enunciation*' and must be understood as such (213). This cultural materialist approach marks a strength of this book as it does of Ahmed's deeply contextualised literary analysis (discussed above). Indeed, the key strength of the work as a whole is as a model for a new kind of criticism that draws on an eclectic yet complementary mix of sources and approaches in order to complicate and undermine dominant narratives about British Asians through localised and deep studies.

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